

Unpacking 'disadvantage' and 'potential' in the context of fair access policies in England

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Unpacking 'disadvantage' and 'potential' in the context of fair access policies in England.

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Abstract

Policy makers internationally are increasingly preoccupied with the need for education systems to be developed in ways that mitigate unfairness. What is more contestable is what might need to change. In England this emphasis has informed the development of fair access policies that aim to improve the representation of 'disadvantaged' young people of high 'potential' at high status universities. Drawing on research conducted at the inception of one fair access intervention this paper provides original insights into a process of policy translation that requires multiple *encodings* and *decodings* of two constructs that defy ready definition, with their intersection being a particular point of difficulty. Behind the apparent objectivity of commonly used selection criteria sits a process of situated decision-making that incorporates not only the particularities of institutional context and the understandings of key actors, but macro level pressures that reinforce the need for changes in understandings of fairness at the top.

Unpacking ‘disadvantage’ and ‘potential’ in the context of ‘fair access’ policies in England.

Policy makers internationally are increasingly preoccupied with the need for education systems to be developed in ways that mitigate unfairness. What is more contestable is what might need to change for this to be achieved. In England this emphasis has informed the development of fair access policies that aim to improve the representation of young people identified as ‘disadvantaged’ and of high academic ‘potential’ at the most high status universities¹. This under-representation matters as these institutions filter access to positions of wealth and power in later life (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Fair access policies are no guarantee of higher levels of fairness, however, as post-graduation opportunities still tend to favour the better connected (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Brown, 2013; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013; Crawford et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the more advantaged tend to attribute their successes to “*a willingness to work hard and take one’s opportunities*” (Brown et al., 2014, p.17). Ball (1993, p.12) argues that “*policies are not exterior to inequalities*” and in the case of England the understandings of ‘disadvantage’ and ‘potential’ that underpin them, disproportionately embody the perspectives of an elite educated in the same universities targeted under fair access interventions (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Bøyum, (2014) in a recent review of OECD² policies argues that such understandings are as likely to be as implicit as they are explicit. This matters because as Dorling (2013, p.97) notes “*different people have different definitions of fairness, some of which may be fairer than others.*” Drawing on selected data from research conducted during the pilot phase of a fair access intervention developed by a third sector organisation this paper unpacks the difficulties associated with the need to operationalise two constructs that defy ready definition. It provides original insights into a process of policy translation at the micro level that requires multiple “*encodings*” and “*decodings*” (Ball, 1993, p.11) of both, with their intersection being a particular point of difficulty. Behind the apparent objectivity of commonly used criteria sits a process of situated decision-making that incorporates not only the particularities of institutional context and key actors’ understandings but competing tensions generated by other policies advanced at macro level. Given that the social composition of high status universities has changed so little over time, despite the high profile of this agenda and significant investment of resource (Burke, 2013; Harrison and McCaig, 2015), the paper concludes that different understandings of fairness are required, particularly at the top.

i. ‘Potential’ in the context of fair access policies

Ball et al (2011, p.622) suggest that policies have “*vocabularies*” that require a process of encoding and decoding that shapes the “*contours*” of both thought and action as they are mediated and

¹ Typically defined as those belonging to the Russell Group and including Oxford and Cambridge

² The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

enacted in different contexts in different ways. A central tenet of fair access policies is that the 'potential' of 'disadvantaged' young people must be identified in order to prevent a 'waste' of 'talent' that would be detrimental to the individual and the economy (Mijs, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016). The idea that a meritocracy will lead to higher levels of levels of social mobility has been critiqued for its unfairness (Mijs, 2016), Reay (2013) drawing an analogy between this and the childhood story of the emperor wearing no clothes, with those around being too scared to point this out. That there are also disconnects in current macro level understandings of fairness and how this can be improved is evidenced by continuing support for independent and academically selective state grammar schools even though these are key drivers of social stratification and frequently used to evidence the need for the fair access agenda (Andrews et al., 2016; Harris and Rose, 2013; Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2014). Similarly, there is no challenge at the macro level to the practice of setting by 'ability' even though the evidence shows that this impacts most negatively on the most 'disadvantaged' (Dunne et al, 2007; Francis et al., 2017). Reay (2011) in an analysis of the differences between the Finnish and the English education systems concludes that higher levels of fairness in the English education system are contingent on changes in the understandings of those at the top.

Bøyum, (2014) argues that policy makers internationally subscribe to the idea that individuals have different 'potentials' and that the challenge is therefore simply to ensure that all have opportunities to develop them. In contrast, Sternberg (1998, p.17) proposes a "*developing expertise*" model with five key elements in a feedback loop that includes motivation, knowledge and metacognitive skills. A shift towards more situated understandings of 'potential' and its development highlights the importance of the quality of the learning experiences afforded to individuals within different contexts (Barab and Plucker, 2002; Korp, 2011; Matthews and Yun Dai, 2014). Previous research also suggests that teachers tend to read 'potential' subjectively and that these readings are often classed (Dunne and Gazeley, 2008; Jonsson et al, 2012; Matthews and Yun Dai, 2014). This leads Callahan (2005, p.104) to emphasise the importance of adults' "*willingness to re-structure thinking and behaviour*". In the context of fair access policies, the ways in which key actors enact their understandings of 'potential' have both short and long term implications, shaping trajectories long before young people are in a position to consider university or where to apply.

To some extent fair access policies represent a re-encoding of the 'Gifted and Talented' (G&T) policies introduced by the New Labour government in 1999 but later discontinued under the Coalition government following their election in 2010 (Casey and Koshy, 2012). Some teachers found the selectivity engendered by the need to compile school registers of 'Gifted and Talented' young people in order to filter access to additional enrichment activities uncomfortable (Radnor et al., 2007; Casey and Koshy, 2012). These identifications were sometimes made on the basis of performance in one-off intelligence tests although the reliability of these is contested (Sternberg,

1998; Barab and Plucker, 2002; Callahan, 2005; Radnor et al. 2007; Matthews and Yun Dai, 2014). While there was an expectation that these registers would fairly reflect each institutional context (DCSF, 2008, p.2) and reduce the intersection of social with educational disadvantage (Casey and Koshy, 2012) they were nevertheless critiqued for social bias (Callahan, 2005; Radnor et al., 2007; Gorard, 2008; Matthews and Yun Dai, 2014). Such identifications matter as they give rise to *“identities... which are constantly re-privileged within education policy and schools”* (Ball, 2010, p.162). Although no longer mandated to identify young people in this way, fair access interventions routinely target young people deemed to exhibit high ‘potential’ and relatively little is known about how such judgements are made.

A clear sign of the difficulty of making reliable identifications of ‘disadvantage’ and ‘potential’ can be seen in moves towards more contextualised university admissions processes. Such approaches are sometimes considered contentious precisely because they seek to make understandings of fairness explicit and encourage them to be unpacked (Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2016; Thiele et al. 2016). Although much attention has been focused on developing *“appropriate”* indicators of ‘disadvantage’ there is no consensus around what these are (Lane and Birds, 2013 p.138). This is more than a complex analytical problem, however, given that such decision-making has real life implications. A study conducted at the University of Oxford also found that admissions tutors were unsure about whether/how to take account of *“competitor starting points”* and that the minority who did, only did so when the differences in attainment between candidates from different backgrounds were marginal (Nahai, 2013 p.699). Further evidence of the difficulty of separating current from future ‘potential’ can be seen in a number of studies showing that young people educated in more advantaged contexts are later out-performed by those from schools disproportionately attended by young people from less advantaged social groups and where overall levels of attainment are low (Hoare and Johnston, 2011; Thiele et al, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars, 2016; Crawford et al., 2017). While much attention has been focused on institutional ‘disadvantage’ as a factor depressing the capacity to demonstrate ‘potential’ in the form of prior attainment, Francis et al. (2017) point out that there are actually larger differences in opportunities to attain at a high level *within* schools than between them as a consequence of the practice of grouping by ‘ability’. While the interplay between individuals, contexts and wider systems is influential (Kintrea et al., 2015) there continue to be gaps in our understanding of how these relate to the micro processes of schools. Although fair access interventions sit outside these processes they can also overlap, making it important to pay more attention to these intersections.

ii. **‘Disadvantage’ in the context of fair access policies**

McIntosh (2012 p.196) makes the point that ‘disadvantage’ cannot be understood without reference to advantage. Nevertheless it is ‘disadvantage’ that has come to dominate policy

discourse and at its worst this encodes the kinds of unreflexive understandings that embed rather than challenge assumptions of deficit:

White disadvantaged young people, male and female, are more likely than their disadvantaged BME³ counterparts to want to leave full time education; have poorer attitudes towards school and their academic work; believe that the best jobs do not necessarily go to those who have been to university; and say that it is harder for them to improve things for themselves compared to their parents. (BIS, 2015, p.37)

Smith and Smith (2014, p.716) argue that the term 'disadvantage' has "*bundled together economic, social, educational and cultural factors*" that are all potentially relevant and this multi-dimensionality perhaps plays a part in it being differently understood. A recent review of national Pupil Premium funding⁴ found that different understandings of 'disadvantage' in different contexts informed different approaches to intervention despite the agenda being firmly linked to specified criteria⁵ (Carpenter et al., 2013). *The encoding of 'disadvantage'* within fair access policies is more ambiguous, as it incorporates criteria designed to capture individual, institutional and area level dimensions. These are then used not only to select young people for inclusion in fair access interventions but also later as part of university admissions processes and for macro level monitoring purposes. To add to the complexity those working at different points in these processes (policy makers, analysts, universities, third sector organisations, schools and colleges) may operate not only with different understandings of 'disadvantage' but with different (combinations of) criteria and priorities.

Ball (1993, p.10) argues that one of the major challenges for those interested in policy analysis is to "*relate together analytically the ad hocery of the macro with the ad hocery of the micro.*" The concept of *ad hocery* is particularly pertinent to a discussion of how 'disadvantage' is operationalised within fair access policies. Guidance from the Higher Education Council for England issued in 2007 acknowledged that identification may need to follow a "*slow*" and "*iterative process*" and that the fit between the individual and the criteria might sometimes be imprecise (HEFCE, 2007, p.12). More recently there has been a shift towards the use of area-based data that measures differences in local rates of progression to university (HEFCE, 2015). However, it is perfectly possible to live inside an area or attend a school without sharing its demographics (Harrison and McCaig, 2015; Boliver et al, 2015; Thiele et al 2016). Phillips (2007, p.299) argues that these forms of geo-demographic data are neither neutral nor without effects, making it important to ask "*what is being lost in the various forms of inscription and translation undertaken.*" Boliver et al., (2015) contend that Free School Meals (FSM) data are more discerning, emphasising its strong links with material 'disadvantage' and low attainment. National data (DfE,

³ Black and Minority Ethnic

⁴ Additional funding for schools in England, linked to a high profile policy agenda that aims to narrow attainment gaps between 'disadvantaged' young people and others.

⁵ Primarily relates to eligibility for Free School Meals but also includes Looked After Children and those with parents serving in the armed forces.

2017a) suggest a small decline in the proportion of FSM eligible young people (to 14%), linked to changes in benefit regulations and it is possible that some of the uncertainty found at micro level around the extent to which this measure adequately captures 'disadvantage' (Gazeley et al. 2017) may stem from the wider context of rising rates of child poverty, much of this in working households (Child Poverty Action Group, no date). Somewhat ironically, while the fair access agenda is explicitly concerned with reducing institutionally embedded social class hierarchies (Raffe and Croxford, 2015), social class is thought too difficult to reliably encode and decode (HEFCE, 2015; Thiele et al, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2017). Even the most experienced analysts stress the need for nuanced application of the various criteria (Gorard, 2012; DfE, 2014; Boliver et al, 2015) and there are clear difficulties arising from the need to connect these securely with their practical applications.

When it comes to *explaining* the under-representation of young people from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds at the most academically selective universities there are many overlapping factors at play. Manley and Johnston (2014. p.262) argue that "*educational disadvantage reflects the country's social geography*" with young people attending schools located in more middle class areas being more likely to attend high status universities. Boliver (2013) argues that state school applicants need to have demonstrated higher levels of 'potential' than young people educated in the independent sector as they tend to be better qualified, both before thinking of applying and before getting an offer. Mangan et al., (2010) identify not living close enough to a leading university as an important factor alongside fear of debt and examination performance. Much attention has also been focused on poor subject choices while at school (BIS, 2015). Dunne et al., (2014) suggest that differences in levels of support and resource and institutional norms and expectations are key. Historically interventions were framed as remediation for a deficit in individual aspiration and often linked to deficits in family 'culture' even though aspirations are produced within a "*recursive loop*" that is subject to multiple contextual factors (Kintrea et al., 2015, p.667). While differences in family experience of university are known to contribute to different methods of navigating university decision-making (Ball, et al, 2002; Gale and Parker. 2015), theories of capital (Bourdieu, 2002) despite being used extensively in the academic literature are only rarely encoded in the criteria used to filter access to fair access interventions. A tendency to target young people with no family history of university suggests that the importance of social networks *is* understood, but as this approach covers a wide social and economic spectrum it can perpetuate unfairness when the relatively more advantaged are included at the expense of the least.

A brief introduction to the intervention

This paper focuses on the insights the pilot phase of the intervention afforded into a persistent challenge for policy and practice rather than the specifics of the intervention per se. This ran between 2010 and 2012 as the country was transitioning between governments and at a time

when the focus on high status universities within fair access policies was less intense. The participating institutions were still working with vestiges of the ‘Gifted and Talented’ and widening participation policies associated with the national Aimhigher programme. Evidence of the continuities between these macro level approaches can be found in the current positioning of the third sector organisation’s intervention within a fair access/social mobility agenda.

The intervention was designed to span a four year period, from the start of Year 10 (aged 14) to the end of Year 13 (aged 18). Its stated aim was to work with the young people holistically over time. However, the pilot phase lasted for only two years. In addition to recruiting a first cohort of Year 10s, a first cohort of Year 12s were also recruited who began the intervention at a mid-point rather than its start. This incorporated a range of elements including: regular locally organised learning days; residentials with an academic focus; visits to universities; frequent meetings with an institution-based learning mentor; institutional support for the development of provision to better meet the needs of the ‘most able’. As such it incorporated elements identified by Lupton and Kintrea (2011, p.330-331) as being particularly useful in interventions of this type, being “*tailored to local contexts and...bolstered by ongoing support, mentoring and guidance.*”

The intervention was piloted with 10 schools and colleges located in two geographical areas. They included six 11-16 schools, one school with a sixth form, two sixth form colleges and one college of further education. Area A was characterised by those interviewed as experiencing a high level of social disadvantage, linked to a history of intergenerational unemployment. In contrast Area B was considered to feel the pull of relatively well-paid non-graduate jobs. While the 11-16 schools in Area A had a profile typical of those targeted under fair access interventions those in Area B were more diverse in their social and ethnic composition and overall levels of attainment at age 16. The participating institutions were not homogenous. For example, one of the post 16 institutions had no history of young people gaining places at the most academically selective universities whereas another had experienced some success. The pilot phase began with the selection of 115 young people meeting at least one of the following ‘disadvantage’ criteria⁶:

- First generation to access higher education
- Low household income⁷
- Parent/carer(s) in non-professional occupations

⁶ This approach that was tightened after the first year.

⁷In receipt of either Free School Meals or Education Maintenance Allowance (replaced in the second year with a maximum household income threshold of £25,000 when this was withdrawn following a change of policy).

For the Year 12s selection on the basis of 'potential' was based on performance in national examinations taken at age 16 but for the Year 10s it was decoded from one-off performance in a Cognitive Ability Test (CAT).

Research design

The research on which this paper draws took the form of an independent evaluation that aimed to provide both formative and summative feedback on what was at that time a new intervention. It incorporated a wide range of methods and perspectives with data being collected in three phases at the start, middle and end of the two year pilot period, consents for this having been obtained. Key adults interviewed (n=86) fall within two broad groupings:

- Staff employed by the participating institutions, including classroom teachers, senior teachers, intervention leads and 'Gifted and Talented' co-ordinators
- Key actors more directly involved in the development and delivery of the intervention, including area co-ordinators and institution-based learning mentors.

Also included were the selected young people and a small number of their peers. The young people involved in the intervention completed questionnaires anonymously, were observed at key events and took part in focus group discussions. A small number of their parents (n=13) were also interviewed and/or completed questionnaires.

All data were initially subjected to an iterative process of analysis that involved consideration of the specific evaluation objectives and subsequently re-analysed for the purposes of this paper. A number of limitations need to be acknowledged. Given that the pilot took place over a two year period none of the young people experienced the intervention in its entirety. School staff also engaged more fully with the research process than those in large post 16 institutions. While more information about the backgrounds of adults interviewed would have cast more light on how differences in understandings of the fair access agenda are produced, such data were not directly solicited at the time of the research.

Discussion of findings

This section begins with a discussion of key actors' understandings of fairness and the fair access agenda specifically. It then explores the process of situated decision-making entailed by the need to decode both 'disadvantage' and 'potential'. In the process it highlights institutional differences and a process of re-encoding and 'potential' production that further challenges the tendency to view this as something fixed rather than as something inextricably connected with a broad range of individual, institutional and external factors.

i. Understandings of fairness

The intervention was launched in the context of an education system known to reproduce the conditions that favour established social hierarchies. That it can be challenging to advance an agenda explicitly concerned with changing the status quo was suggested by the observation that the combination of 'disadvantage' and 'potential' required for inclusion in the intervention is "*not necessarily something you want to shout about*" (Staff, 2, School C). The fact that the intervention required higher than usual levels of selectivity seemed to generate some resistance. One key actor described the intervention as an "*unashamedly elitist opportunity to take the best brains and move them on*" (Staff 2, School G) but another reflected uneasily on the *unfairness* of:

An exclusivity attached to the small number selected. An issue is its relation to equality of opportunity. Students may ask: Why me? Why not me? (Staff 2, School B)

Burke (2013, p.112) argues that the fair access agenda reflects an intensification of an ideological position that bestows recognition on some at the expense of others. One senior teacher said that she recognised "*the pros and cons of selecting a small group*" but was also aware that the programme had engendered *some "discontent and disappointment, a divisiveness that needed to be managed"* (Staff 2, School G). While one staff member considered the programme to provide "*unfair assistance*" (Staff 3, School E) another noted that young people "*get additional support in different ways*" (Staff 1, School G). These mixed responses are somewhat contradictory given that established institutional norms already included the targeted selection of young people for 'Gifted and Talented' and widening participation activities but also routine judgements around academic 'potential' for the purposes of grouping by 'ability.' Given that the expressed aim of this programme was to mitigate the forms of unfairness associated with 'disadvantage' it is important to further unpick these reservations and inconsistencies.

ii.

Understandings of fair access

At the time of the research the focus on leading universities within fair access policies was incipient rather than well-established. Asked to explicitly reflect on this school staff again exhibited mixed responses. One attributed having gained a place at one herself to having attended a grammar school and therefore felt strongly that young people attending "*ordinary comprehensives*" needed to know that these universities "*were not out of reach*" (Staff 2, School D). Two others talked positively about access to these being a necessary precursor to much needed social change:

Equality of opportunities is essential if we are going to have the sort of society we want to have. There is already such a divide between the haves and have nots. (Staff 1, School D)

And:

If we are ever to do something about social mobility we need to move some on to the upper echelons of society... Otherwise the British class structure remains firmly intact. (Staff 1, School G)

Others saw the intervention as a means of addressing a tendency to make “*safe choices*” (Staff 1, College M) or “*widening horizons*” (Staff 1, School D). While one noted that the young people needed to recognise that they had “*a steeper hill to climb*” others wondered if the young people would fit in socially, if they were the right “*calibre*” and how they might feel if they failed to gain a place. The first hand experiences of university afforded by the programme appeared to have equipped the young people to form their own judgements:

It made me realise it's not just for posh people. It gave me the motivation to try harder. (Year 10 Focus Group, Phase 3)

It was probably a good thing I went there so I know I want to go to one which is more down to earth. It helped me as otherwise I wouldn't have been sure or known what I prefer. (Year 10 Focus Group, Phase 2)

While these two young people, like the adults around them, differed in their assessment of the importance of these universities, all shared a decoding of the linkages between them and their dominant social intakes. While some staff made explicit connections between this agenda and change in wider social systems, more individualised, cultural understandings seemed to preclude this.

iii. Selection as a human process

Third sector organisations have come to play an important mediating role in relation to the translation of fair access policies from macro to micro level. In an increasingly marketised sector they also operate with a good level of autonomy including when it comes to specifying the access criteria to be used. The process of decoding associated with the implementation of these criteria was described by staff as being “*very labour intensive*” (Staff, 1, School G) and as sometimes giving rise to “*awkward*” and slightly “*antagonistic conversations*” with parents (Staff 1, College M). A number indicated that it had taken time to develop the confidence to initiate conversations around the ‘disadvantage’ criteria in use. Some also reported coming under parental pressure to include, one noting that some “*feel disadvantaged if they have been to university*” (Staff 1, School D). There were examples where quite nuanced judgements were required, for example where parents had started at university and dropped out or gained Open University degrees in later life or where other factors such as health were involved. Initial difficulties filtering out more advantaged students can also be linked to over reliance on a single indicator and the need to recruit Year 12s on the basis of limited knowledge of their backgrounds. For example, it was possible to meet low income criteria but also have a parent educated to degree level. There was evident variation in the levels of individual ‘disadvantage’ experienced by the young people included in the first cohort. For example, one of the Year 12s was living alone and another required a high level of personal support:

With the huge help from my mentor, I stayed on at college so without her I would not be able to go to Uni as I would not have had the A levels. (Year 12 Questionnaire, Phase 3)

Nevertheless, asked at stage one about their knowledge of university around half of the young people could not name a family member or friend with first-hand experience of university and it was clear that some of the Year 10s had very little knowledge of this:

I don't really know anything about university at all – only that you sleep there and do courses that you want to do. (Year 10 Focus Group, Phase 1)

It was noted that it had been “*difficult to get the balance of the right level of disadvantage and potential*” (Staff 1, School D). That this is indicative of a wider systems-level challenge was suggested when an external partner who was interviewed reflected that they were “*always struggling*” to find students with this profile for their bursary programme but working with many from the independent sector who simply pay to access this support.

iv. Situated decision-making

Braun, et al (2011) note that policies are enacted differently even in similar seeming contexts. Relatively few of the young people selected to be part of the first cohort of Year 10s met Free School Meals criteria⁸. One staff member considered this to be a “*blunt instrument*” (Staff 1, School B) and another that more were eligible than actually applied. The school that selected the smallest number of this group was one of those where overall rates were higher and the school that selected the most was one where overall rates were low. Clearly there is no automatic connection between institutional and individual representation; in this case better levels appeared to stem from a deliberate decision to select young people deemed unresponsive to all other forms of intervention, a strategy that was deemed in retrospect to have been somewhat unsuccessful. That such forms of situated decision-making can also be informed by subjective norms and expectations is reflected in the assertion of a minority of classroom teachers that some young people were “*less deserving*” (Staff 2, School C). Where young people left the intervention early this was linked either to the idea that they had been wrongly selected in the first place or to the level of individual ‘disadvantage’. One learning mentor suggested, for example, that for a minority there were “*simply more things dragging them down than pulling them up.*” A very small number of the Year 10s went on to be permanently excluded from their schools on disciplinary grounds, including one deemed to have otherwise made good progress and for whom the possibility of a return to the intervention in Year 12 was kept open. That it is possible to act to ensure the improved representation of young people experiencing material disadvantage’ and its associated social and educational dimensions where there is an active commitment to doing so, was confirmed by the increased representation of Free School Meals eligible young people in the second year

⁸ Pupil Premium policies have raised the institutional profile of young people eligible for Free School Meals but were not well established at the time of the research.

v. Decoding the ‘potential’ of the Year 10s

National ‘Gifted and Talented’ policies incorporated an acknowledgement that “*our collective understanding of what constitutes ability is still evolving*” (DCSF, 2008, n.p), a situation that continues to contribute to the difficulty of encoding ‘potential’ in interventions of this type. At the time of the research the 11-16 schools still had ‘Gifted and Talented’ co-ordinators but not all of the Year 10s selected for the intervention were included on these registers. One of the co-ordinators recognised a degree of social bias, commenting that those on the list were “*not so much G&T as parentally advantaged*” with most being educated to degree level (Staff, 1, School D). Some of those included in the intervention were later added but not all. In Area A this identification also opened the door to additional examination revision classes. Unlike the year 12s who were selected on the basis of performance in exams taken at age 16 the Year 10s were selected on the basis of their performance in a cognitive ability test. One learning mentor felt that in some cases the identification had not, in retrospect, been “*sufficiently robust*”. A further sign of the unpredictability of these identifications included the small number of Year 10s who came in as reserves having not initially been selected on this basis and who nevertheless went on to make good progress. Cognitive ability tests were reintroduced as standard practice at one school in the belief that these would provide a stronger indication of ‘potential’ than other forms of available data. In contrast, another participant advocated for a more extended period of assessment when it came to selection for the intervention on the grounds that this would better enable the identification of those “*with the potential to be two steps ahead and not necessarily those who were already.*” Such differences in understanding and approach reinforce the difficulty of making fair assessments of ‘potential’ but also the unfairness of failing to acknowledge these difficulties.

vi. Macro level factors implicated in the production of ‘disadvantage’

The move towards more contextualised university admissions processes reflects the difficulty of decoding ‘potential’ solely on the basis of prior attainment given that a range of individual, institutional and external factors are at play. Nevertheless the Year 12s were recruited at the pilot stage on this basis⁹ and given the proximity of the post 16 institutions to the participating schools, it is highly likely that some were progressing from schools in Area A described by staff as having previously provided an “*impoverished*” learning environment (Staff 2, School G), linked to poor and unstable teaching arrangements. Schools are under considerable pressure to reach threshold levels in national performance tables in examinations taken at age 16. Such macro level pressures can be seen to create a conflict of interest between institutional priorities and the best interests of young people. For example, the ‘*banking*’ of examination grades¹⁰ as part of an early entry policy

⁹ The intention was in future years to work through from Year 10-13, avoiding this necessity

¹⁰ Changes have subsequently been made at policy level to prevent such practices

aimed to ensure that the institution reached minimum attainment threshold levels but some staff recognised that this militated against the achievement of the top grades needed to access places at high status universities. The practice of setting individual attainment targets that were too low was also identified as having embedded underachievement. In contrast activities linked to the intervention could be seen to have fostered the incremental development of potential through heightened metacognitive awareness and motivation:

I know more about myself: my learning skills, what kind of person I am and how I work well. I also know what areas I want to improve. (Year 10 Questionnaire, Phase 3)

I think it has made me aspire to achieve more and realise I can achieve more and also therefore, in turn, driven me to try harder. (Year 10 Focus Group, Phase 3)

Nevertheless staff and young people sometimes expressed concerns about the intervention taking them out of the classroom. Staff in some of the 11-16 schools in Area A suggested that challenges arising from the selection process had *“highlight[ed] certain weaknesses”* and led to a *“better understanding of what to do with a wider cohort,”* improving *“the chances of succeeding at [the school]”* (Staff 2, School G). The assumption that institutionally depressed ‘potential’ is reflected in lower levels of individual prior attainment but can be disconnected from the wider macro level context is a particular form of unfairness.

vii. Linking selection to the production of ‘potential’

The research suggested a number of ways in which being selected for inclusion in the intervention encouraged the development of individual ‘potential.’ Young people taking part in one focus group reported a desire to show they *“were in it for a reason, capable and not just randomly picked.”* Being selected for the programme was seen in many cases to have had an impact on self-esteem. One parent reported that it had made her daughter *“realise that she could do more than she thought she could”* and another that *“the confidence that others have in him increases the confidence that he has in himself.”* The young people reported similar benefits in self-perception:

People expect more of us now... They expect more determination. [This] motivates us as we don’t want to disappoint anyone (Year 10 Focus Group, Phase 3)

Perhaps most importantly is that it has hugely increased my confidence and encouraged me to aim as high as I can (Year 12 Questionnaire, Phase 3)

Further evidence that the identification of ‘potential’ can in some ways be self-fulfilling can be found in the higher level of monitoring engaged in by some of the institutions. This higher level of scrutiny was said to be *“preventing young people from dipping under the radar as probably they have been doing in the past”* (Staff, 1, School C). Evidence of the improved status of the young people was further reflected in the fact that many of the Year 10s in both areas went on to take up school

leadership positions. They were identified by staff as not only providing “*effective role models*” but also as “*helping change the culture of the school*”(Staff 1, School G). All of these aspects point to a complex ‘feedback loop’ (Sternberg, 1998, p.17) that highlights not only the limitations of input/output understandings of intervention but also the value of understanding ‘potential’ not as something fixed but as something developed within the micro-processes of schooling, some aspects of which are internal, some external and some of which, as in this case, aim to connect the two. In the words of one young person:

Little things add up to a big change in you as a person ... effects quite gradual and quite hidden but definitely different. (Year 11 Focus Group, Phase 3)

While the young people varied in their experiences of the intervention, the benefits that some derived suggest the importance of ensuring that these opportunities are as fairly distributed as possible when they are not available to all given that unfairness at this level can be perpetuated at the next.

Final reflections on fairness

Maguire et al. (2011, p.487) argue that policy “*is always a process of becoming*” and subject to the “*perspectives, positions and values*” of different actors as well as “*time and place*”. Archer (2007) wrote over a decade ago that the hierarchical distinctions between universities have been both accepted and re-produced by policy makers. Recent national data certainly indicates that in the intervening period the social composition of universities has not substantially changed, with the minority educated in the independent sector¹¹ continuing to take up places disproportionately:

An estimated 66% of pupils who took A level in Independent schools progressed to the most selective [Higher Education Institutions], 35 percentage points higher than those in state-funded schools/colleges (31%). (DfE, 2017b, p.3)

The independent/state school binary has become a particular macro level focus but a report produced at the time of this intervention’s inception clearly suggests the need to unpack further the forms of ‘disadvantage’ that matter most:

At the most selective universities of all, including Oxbridge, less than 1% of students are FSM pupils – compared with nearly half the intake from independent schools. At the least selective universities, on the other hand, FSM pupils can make up nearly a quarter of the student intakes. (Sutton Trust, 2010, p.6).

Boliver (2016) draws attention to the important ethnic dimensions of this stratification and also hidden within such data are those in the care of the state. Continuing high levels of stratification in the university sector are not surprising given that lower levels of the education system are similarly stratified. Moves towards more contextualised admissions processes at least recognise these as inter-connected issues and it is clear that both levels need to be addressed. The decision to

¹¹ Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) gives a figure of 7%.

introduce new national data monitoring streams recording progression to the most academically selective universities serves to focus attention on this issue at institutional level¹². However, as Harridge et al (2014) note such approaches are likely to be experienced as most stigmatising in those contexts least able to compete. As evidenced in this research, such macro level approaches can also create distortions in such schools that then need to be corrected by new policy measures¹³. Given that those involved in fair access interventions are known to be more likely to target at the softer end of the 'disadvantage' spectrum (Harrison and Waller, 2017), increased pressure to evidence success is unlikely to leverage significant improvements in the under-representation of these least advantaged groups.

Lupton and Thrupp (2013) argue that there is no clear connection between the level of institutional 'disadvantage' and the understandings and actions of key actors. Fair access policies are enacted within complex processes that involve multiple actors in different contexts and sometimes, as in this case, they are also mediated by third sector organisations. Braun et al., (2011) make it clear that institutional differences are produced within the interplay between localities and other internal and external factors. Although the study suggested that demographic differences were important, there was no straightforward relationship between the level of institutional 'disadvantage' and the level of 'disadvantage' experienced by young people selected for inclusion in the intervention. Some staff in these particular institutional contexts were found to be more reflexive and more receptive to developing new approaches than others. They also brought different understandings of both fairness and 'disadvantage' to this agenda and these then informed their responses to the intervention and its aims. The research also highlighted the importance of attending to the differences made by institutional type. In aspiring to maintain support for the young people as they moved from the smaller 11-16 schools to begin Year 12 in much larger institutions the intervention appeared to promise a reduced risk of unfairness arising from weak identifications of 'disadvantage' being made on the basis of limited prior knowledge.

Ball et al. (2011 p.620) argue that *"meaning work" is central to policy enactment.* The research clearly suggests that despite the many easy references to 'disadvantage' and 'potential' at macro level, these are difficult constructs to work with at the micro level. The intersection between the two could also be seen to be challenging and contentious rather than unproblematic. In the case of the Year 10s, the decision to encode 'potential' as a score in a cognitive ability test rather than relying on prior attainment, was accepted by some but disputed by others and in some of the schools in Area A it also acted as a catalyst for positive change. That some of the successes were 'surprising' highlights the unfairness of treating 'potential' as something fixed, objective and predictable when it

¹² The school performance data published by the DfE now includes universities destinations, broken down by institutional status. See: <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables>

¹³ Performance tables have been successively tightened to try to avoid institutional 'gaming' and there is no reason why this case will be any different

is clearly both relationally and contextually produced. While the research points strongly to the importance of the understandings that key actors bring to the forms of situated decision-making that occur within fair access interventions these are often neither explicit nor visible. Spaces within which to develop and share such understandings are also in short supply, making it difficult to challenge those that incorporate implicit or explicit social bias. Third sector organisations are no different from university widening participation teams in carrying both power and responsibility when it comes to overseeing the fairer redistribution of opportunities at this level and their preferred processes of encoding and decoding both 'disadvantage' and 'potential' are key as is the attention that they pay to the intersection between the two.

Reay (2011) argues that social change needs to begin with change in those at the top. Notwithstanding education is a positional good (Power and Frandji, 2010; Raffe and Croxford, 2015) and it might be argued that fair access policies as currently advanced at macro level aim not to ensure fairness at all but to strengthen the justification for retaining established hierarchies (Reay 2011; 2013; Mountford-Zimdars et al. 2016). Archer (2007) argues that widening participation policies were always based on an acceptance of these, with distinctions being made between 'gold' universities and others that condoned the separation of different groups of students into different tracks. Evidence of a continuing reluctance to dismantle educational/social hierarchies can be found in resurgent Conservative party interest in overturning the ban on new grammar schools in England and their support for the back-door expansion of these through the creation of additional places in those that still exist (Jeffreys, 2018). McIntosh (2012 p.196) argues that the privileged are so divorced from the realities of everyday lives that they are simply unable to recognise deficiencies in their understandings, considering them "*normal and accurate*." Were the fair access agenda to be reframed as one designed to tackle unfair over-representation, alternative approaches might be found, based not on a modest process of assimilation and redistribution but on a commitment to reducing the structures and processes that keep privilege intact. This would extend well beyond calls for the removal of charitable status from independent schools and could include quotas to ensure that high status universities recruit intakes that are drawn fairly from across all types of pre-entry institutions *and* the full spectrum of 'disadvantage'.

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